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VITTORINO DA FELTRE¹

ALTHOUGH the humanistic movement took its rise in Italy, and is associated in its early stages with such great names as those of Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio, this fact has not been very much impressed upon students of education in the western world. The typical humanist is probably more generally found in Johann Sturm in his gymnasium at Strassburg than anywhere else, doubtless because by far the larger part of our material for the history of education has come to us from German sources. It will be news to many that early in the sixteenth century there flourished in a small Italian city one of the most interesting, suggestive and successful schools of which we have any record, the presiding genius of which may fairly be counted, by any proper measure, as one of the greatest schoolmasters of any age or any people. This school was the Mantuan school, nobly presided over by Vittorino Da Feltre. Mr. Woodward has given us, so far as I am aware, the first fair account of this institution and its master to be found in English.

Vittorino wrote no books himself, but he did write himself large in the character of his pupils and disciples, a number of whom have passed down the traditions and practices of his school in literary works that bear all the imprints of most affectionate regard for their great teacher. There are some Italian authorities and several Latin treatises. Buisson, in his *Dictionnaire de pédagogie*, has an excellent article on Vittorino by Enrico Paglia, who was in 1884, at the time the article was written, director of the municipal schools of Mantua. Mr. Woodward's book is a scholarly production, admirably written, which gives a lifelike picture of a great teacher, a description of his school and his methods of high pedagogical value, and, incidentally, throws a vast amount of light upon an exceedingly interesting period in the history of education.

¹ *Vittorino Da Feltre and Other Humanist Educator* by WILLIAM HARRISON WOODWARD, University Press, Cambridge.

Vittorino was the son of poor but noble parents by the name of Rambaldoni. He was born in the little town of Feltre, in 1378 or 1379. The boy was small though vigorous, and to his slight size he was said to owe his diminutive name, Vittorino. Later he was called Da Feltre, from the town of his birth. His childhood was passed amid many necessities and few advantages. At an early age he left home to study at the University of Padua, where he was obliged to earn his living as best he could while carrying on his university work. He soon made himself a name as an able grammar teacher, and earned some money in monotonous, laborious private tutoring. After studying arts and philosophy, he turned to mathematics, where, though already holding the doctor's degree, he found himself so poor that, unable to pay the charges of the class conducted by the famous Professor Pelecani, he acted as a household drudge in his master's family for a period of six months. For twenty years we find him located at Padua, in one position or another, gradually rising to the position of one of the most honored professors in the university. He found himself greatly troubled by the looseness of conduct and laxity in living on the part of the students, and from this experience derived his lifelong conviction that the critical period of youth demands, first of all, close, watchful care, and that this can scarcely be secured among the distractions of a university city.

While still professor at Padua, moved no doubt by this feeling, we find him receiving into his own house a number of students who boarded with him. This was at that time a rather common practice among the regents of most universities, and was regarded, ordinarily, merely as a profitable means of livelihood, but to Vittorino it presented itself as a responsibility. He firmly refused, always, to increase the number of his pupils beyond a limit which made it possible for him so exercise a direct personal supervision and gain an intimate knowledge of the character and capacity of each student. He had no hesitation in dismissing any who had proved unsatisfactory in morals, or, though with more reluctance, any who were slow of intellect or disappointed their early promise.

About 1422, in consequence of his sorrow at the prevailing disorder among the students at Padua, and his inability to check it, he resigned his chair and went again to Venice, where he had previously spent a short period in the study of Greek. Here he founded a private school for the sons of Venetian patricians and others, and rapidly became recognized as the most trustworthy and capable teacher of the new learning in Italy. Here he had just become comfortably settled when he received an invitation from Gianfrancesco Gonzaga, in Mantua, to take charge of the education of his children. Gonzaga was a very good sort of man for those times. He wished to secure the best teacher in Italy for his children, and made Vittorino a very liberal proposition, leaving him free, indeed, to fix his own stipend. Vittorino accepted the post, it is said, in the following terms: "I accept the post on this understanding only, that you (*i. e.*, the Marquis Gonzaga) require of me nothing that shall be in any way unworthy of either of us, and I will continue to serve you so long as your own life shall command respect." The arrangement thus made proved in all ways a fortunate one. A beautiful building, formerly used as a pleasure palace, was given up to the purpose of the school. The children of Gonzaga constituted Vittorino's immediate charge. With them Vittorino was empowered to associate, as fellow-pupils, a certain number of the sons of the leading Mantuan families. He later added a department for promising pupils that were selected without regard to the rank of their families, fees being proportionate to the means of the patron, or, it would seem, in some cases, altogether remitted. The pupils who paid nothing were received on absolutely the same footing as the rest of the boys; in some cases he undertook the entire cost of their maintenance, including clothing and books, for ten years or more. The greatest scholars of the times sent their sons to Mantua. The Mantuan school rapidly became the recognized *gymnasio* for the aristocratic youth of northern Italy.

The sumptuous palace placed at his disposal for a school was ruthlessly stripped of all its luxurious furnishings, ornaments, and plate, in order that the children might lead as simple a life

as possible. Certain companions whose influence upon the Gonzaga children he distrusted he weeded out as delicately as possible. Vittorino definitely held himself the father of his scholars ; his school entirely absorbed him. He lived a common life with his scholars, at their meals, in the games, and excursions, always sharing their interests and pleasures. Such was his control over the boys under his charge that harsh punishments were not needed. He watched carefully over habits of self-indulgence in eating and drinking, and considered regular exercise in all conditions of weather as the foundation of health, and health as the first necessity of mental progress. He aimed at sending forth young men who should "serve God in the church and the state in whatever positions they might be called upon to occupy."

The detailed curriculum of the school, including the texts read and the methods followed, as given quite exhaustively by Mr. Woodward, will be read by teachers not only with pleasure, but with direct personal profit, for Vittorino was a great teacher. He anticipated in a marvelous way some of the best methods that we suppose to be thoroughly modern, and joined in himself the characteristics of many of our typical best teachers. A brief summary of his method is all that can here be given. Vittorino was a Platonist, and held that the souls of men are like seeds of divine nature and origin, planted in the body, there to germinate in the soil where, according to its original composition and fertility procured artificially by culture, they might be modified in their development, and reveal the innate faculties that they had within them the better in that they should be less hindered by the materiality of the body. The unique aim of education in general, and that of the child in particular, for him, was to correct the body, which was by nature defective and opposed to the soul, and to give to immortal souls that liberty which was taken from them by union with mortal bodies ; in short, to obtain, according to the formula *mens sana in corpore sano*, the perfect man. Imitation gives the impulse to all this evolution. The foundation of every pedagogical device is the example of the teacher. Therefore, before instructing others, Vittorino wished himself to be healthy, agile, strong, with good manners, sober,

virtuous, learned in many branches of knowledge, an intellectual and spiritual man.

His first preoccupation was the study of the nature of the pupil and his family history, in order to discover the influences of heredity and of avatism, and to choose the sort of activity upon which it would be better to lay emphasis in his exercise and studies. Instruction was of the most varied kind. He offered the pupils many studies at the same time, for, he said, as the body is restored by the variety of its food, so are souls by alternation of materials of study. He believed in the synthesis of knowledge. The school embraced pupils of all ages. He taught reading and writing by means of games and picture tablets of various colors, thus following the example of Quintillian and, perhaps, anticipating Froebel. Next he offered the children Virgil, Homer, Cicero, and Demosthenes, and when they had been fed upon these as upon pure and unadulterated milk, and their stomachs had acquired in this way strength and vigor, he thought they might safely take up the historians and the other poets, more difficult food to assimilate. Then they were taught rhetoric and dialectic; next arithmetic, geometry, astrology, music. Last of all he introduced them to the truth of philosophy in the princes of that domain, Plato and Aristotle. No one could leave his school without having attentively gone through all the philosophy taught by those masters.

Vittorino in his attitude towards his pupils, his fatherly affection for them, his habit of living among them, and in many other facts, suggests Pestalozzi; and, indeed, the latter was himself attracted toward Vittorino, and seems to have known of his work, although Pestalozzi concerned himself, in general, but little with the history of the Renaissance.

For a great part of his life Vittorino thought that he was destined for the monk's calling, and yet in his attitude to physical culture he broke entirely with the traditions and practices of the monkish schools of the Middle Ages and of his own time, and set a standard which has perhaps not anywhere been equaled to this day, except in some of the best schools of England and the United States. He recognized the individuality of each

student, studying first of all what that might be, and so anticipated the movement which is just now gaining ground in this country under the title of Child-study in the secondary schools. He was a man of the most eminent scholarship, and yet entered with enthusiasm and complete surrender into the practical and even the so-called petty details of school life, for to him no task was so attractive, so noble, so satisfying, as that of training the perfect man. All accounts left of him show him to have been a man of singularly sweet and elevated character. Among his pupils were numbered some of the greatest scholars of the period of the Renaissance. Moreover, the children of his noble patron, who grew up under his influence and training, did a surprising thing: with not a single exception, they "turned out well." They represented the best culture and, in most respects, the best living of their time. There seems scarcely a doubt that if the Mantuan school were running today it would rank high among modern educational institutions. That it was a great school, and that Vittorino was a great teacher there is no possible doubt, and the record of his life and work is an inspiring and interesting study for teachers today.

CHARLES H. THURBER